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AUTHOR Lau, Ron
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ABSTRACT

While senior administrators in all educational institutions have highly complex positions and are very expensive to train and replace, human resources departments have always been challenged to find competent administrators that fit well into the organization. Four main variables in the selection process are: the organization's self-awareness of their own policies and climate, the evaluation of the limited data on the applicant, the applicant's evaluation of the organization, and the applicant's self-assessment and presentation. One approach to selecting administrators is the assessment center method, in which multiple individuals observe candidates in varying situations and evaluate their behaviors. The assessment center method is time consuming, complex, people intensive, and expensive, but the results are more thorough and lead to more informed selections. In setting up an assessment process, the determining factor is a job analysis, highlighting typical duties and responsibilities, while specific skill dimensions for the position should also be developed. Tools for evaluating candidates include interviews, tests, observations of candidates in real-life managerial situations, group discussions, oral presentations, analyses of case studies, fact finding exercises, interview simulations, business or computer games, decision making scenarios, scheduling exercises, or mock staff meetings. While the assessment method may be too impractical for most colleges, principles or exercises from the method can be integrated into existing selection processes to make them more reflective of individual institutional needs. (HAA)

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APPLYING THE PRINCIPLES OF THE ASSESSMENT CENTER METHOD IN THE SELECTION PROCESS OF SENIOR ADMINISTRATORS IN EDUCATION

by

Ron Lau

Vice President/Assistant Superintendent of Business Affairs

Compton Community College District

Compton, California

JC 960 647

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Applying the Principles of the Assessment Center Method in the Selection Process of Senior Administrators in Education

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Introduction and Background

Senior administrators, in all educational institutions, are important, have highly complex positions, and are very expensive. All organizations are unique in the compositions of their communities. The community, as a living entity made up of individuals, develops a complex personality that results from the sum of all of the dynamic interactions between the individuals, groups of individuals, and external parties. As a result of the uniqueness of the organizations, in addition to the many differences between senior administrative positions within organizations, human resource departments have always been challenged to find those competent administrators that fit well into the organization.

The application and selection process for senior administrators is an area of human resource management that cannot guarantee results. The first of four major variables in this process is organizational self-awareness. The organization must be keenly aware of its own personality. The policies and procedures of the institution is never independent of the politics or group dynamics of the institution. The climate of the institution changes every time there is an adjustment to the membership. In addition, the organization must be very clear of the requirements, expectations and objectives that are specific to the position. The second variable is applicant evaluation. The institution has very little data on the applicant. The quality of the selection depends highly on the organization's assessment of the applicant's abilities, skills and personality. Normally, the data is limited to a few written pages, a few hours of interviews, and a few references. The third variable is dependent on the applicant, not on

the institution. The applicant must evaluate the organization and the position. The information available to the applicant is limited to a few written pages on the position and organization. There may be a few meetings with various personnel. There may or may not be references from existing or previous employees available to the applicant. The fourth variable is applicant self-assessment and presentation. The applicant always compares the opportunity to the existing situation. In addition, the applicant should evaluate his/her own goals and measure them against the available position. The presentations by the applicant to the employer and vice versa are major factors in the decision processes.

The limitations that restrict the amount of available data to both the institution and the applicant are time and money. The objective of human resource management in the area of administrative selection is to accumulate as much information as possible on the applicant, provide as much information as possible, within reason, to the applicant, and to assess the applicant within the time and budget constraints of the situation.

Assessment Centers

History

Germany began to rebuild its armed forces in the 1930's. The Germans (Wendel &Joekel, 1991) were the first to use situational tests of leadership behaviors in order to improve the selection of its officers. The psychologists stressed holistic measurement of leadership and the benefits of observing applicant behaviors. They used several trained assessors to observe applicant behaviors and to measure complex personality characteristics.

In World War II, British military leaders restructured their procedure for selecting officers. Previously, officers were selected from graduates of elite schools. However, the results from this method of selection were poor and in addition, the war created a greater need for well qualified officers. A military attaché stationed in Berlin learned about Germany's assessment methods and the British incorporated parts of those methods into their own process. The British borrowed upon the German intelligence tests, psychiatric inventories and situational exercises. The British also improved upon the exercises using leaderless group discussions, leaderless group problem-solving activities and other group tasks.

In World War II, General William Donovan was responsible for the recruitment of spies, agents, saboteurs and support personnel for the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), predecessor to the CIA (Wendel & Joekel, 1991). There were no personnel tests available for these type of positions. Candidates for employment were not able to provide information on specific experience nor related employment references. Dr. Henry Murray, director of the Harvard Psychological Clinic in the 1930's, worked with the staff at OSS and devised a battery of tests. Traditional tests included personality inventories, standardized tests of mental ability, work surveys, health and biographical questionnaires. Additional tests included leaderless group discussions and situational exercises designed to measure skills in leadership and stress tolerance. The situational exercises were interactive with staff, other candidates and trained assessors. OSS assessment staff improved the selection process by pooling the

observations and other information on the candidates that resulted from applying a battery of instruments and situational exercises.

The British Civil Service Selection Board developed a multi-stage testing program to assess management candidates after World War II. The testing program consisted of objective testing, interviews, situational tests and a final interview. The major contribution of the board was the application of the assessment center to civilian experience.

In the mid-1950s American Telephone and Telegraph Company researched the Management Progress Study to improve the recruiting and training of managers. The researchers identified 25 characteristics of successful middle-level managers related to attitudes, interpersonal skills, managerial functions, personality variables, education and other issues. Over 400 employees were tracked and evaluated. After approximately ten years, 42% of those identified as management potential had been promoted to management. Only 7 % of those who were not rated as "promotable" had been promoted. The results strongly supported the findings of multiple assessor judgments.

J.C. Penney, Sears, Standard Oil of Ohio, General Electric and IBM (Crane, 1986) are among the many companies that have utilized the assessment center approach with positive results in the application and evaluation of employees. In these cases, specially trained line managers of an equal or higher level than the candidates, but not the immediate supervisors, have used multiple exercises to evaluate up to twelve individuals at the came time. The common procedures include personal interviews, management games,

leaderless group discussions, individual presentations, mock interviews, written exercises, paper and pencil tests, personality and interest inventories. The trained management evaluators observe, evaluate and collaborate on a summary evaluation of each candidate.

In a recent survey (Thornton, 1992) of over 200 assessment centers, organizations indicated that over 68 percent of the programs were designed to identify employees with managerial talent for potential promotions.

Over twenty thousand companies have used the assessment center method (Schuler, 1987) and the number grows each year because of its validity in predicting success and lack of success in job applicants.

The Assessment Center Method

The assessment center method is an extensive program that evaluates candidates for positions based on a number of individual assessments by multiple raters that result from observations of the candidates' behaviors in varying situations. This method provides the organization with much more data on the candidates than the common paper screening and interview process. The assessment center method attempts to replicate real-time work-like situations for the candidates to deal with in order for a number of trained assessors to observe the candidates "at work".

The assessment center method must be job specific or job category specific in order to produce good results. The goal of this method is to measure the skills and behaviors of the candidates against the critical skills and behaviors necessary for the position. A thorough analysis must be done on the position

and the analysis must identify the critical job-related behaviors necessary to succeed. All administrative positions have commonalities such as organizational and people management requirements. The assessment center method looks to measure the specific job requirements that are mostly unique to the position. Technical skills, presentation skills, decision making abilities and the ability to deal with different types of stress should be measured relative to the position.

The skills and behaviors that have been identified must be measured through exercises and tests that are as close to real work experiences as possible. There may be exercises developed to measure specific behaviors individually. There may be exercises or tests developed to measure a number of areas concurrently, such as the case in real work environments. Mediating staff disputes, developing budgets, staff inservice training, public presentations, union negotiations and employee discipline are examples of position behaviors. Tests and exercises need to be developed to measure each critical quality.

The administering of these tests and exercises are generally quite complex. The actual test area can influence the candidates' responses, and therefore, the organization would want to replicate the real work environment as much as possible. Some testing may be done at the real work environment, however, most assessment centers are physically separate from the work site. This reduces the work disruption that would occur if testing were done at the work site. However, this also replaces the dynamic relationships between real staff and the candidates with superficial relationships to test staff.

The assessment of the candidates is done by a team of trained assessors. The assessors must be qualified to measure and understand the critical behaviors of the position. They must observe, record, categorize and evaluate the behaviors in order to rate the candidates against a standardized measure and against one another. The assessors must integrate their findings from a variety of sources and to bring about a composite score. The assessors must then compare their evaluations with each other and discuss their individual observations, in order to arrive at a team evaluation on each of the candidates.

In summary, the assessment center method of selecting applicants for senior administrative positions is time consuming, complex, people intensive and expensive. However, the results are much more thorough and the program provides more quality and quantity data on the candidates. The process must be job specific in order for the results to be valuable. Senior administrators are very expensive. Administrative turnover and administrators that are not producing are much more expensive to the organization.

Case Studies

Alverno College, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in the late 1970s, set out to measure student success in their teacher education program (Thornton & Byham, 1982). The competencies included aesthetic responsiveness, analytical capability, communications skills, problem-solving abilities, and society involvement. Faculty developed more than 20 situational exercises for this assessment. Included were an in-basket exercise used to measure analytical and problem-solving skills. Group discussions were used to measure

communications and social skills. The college also continued to gather information by using the paper and interview tests.

In 1985, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Millersville University, and Slippery Rock University incorporated principles of the assessment center method in their Pre-Teacher Assessment Project (Wendel & Joekel, 1991). The faculty used the assessment program as a diagnostic tool for sophomore students in order to develop specific instructional modules on various teaching skills. The 13 skill dimensions that were identified are planning and organizing, monitoring, leadership, sensitivity, problem analysis, strategic decision making, tactical decision making, oral communication, oral presentation, written communication, innovativeness, stress tolerance, and initiative. The faculty developed "Classroom Vignettes" to elicit behaviors in selected skill dimensions. Teaching simulations were developed for the students, both on a prepared and on an unprepared basis. Organizing and managing an education fair was another exercise for the students. The assessment project was a five year process. The program carried through the matriculation of this student group. Students were provided feedback on their performance from trained assessors. The information helped students develop skills in the targeted dimensions.

Office Supplies Systems (OSS) used an assessment center to identify existing sales representatives and technicians for potential district management positions (Thornton, 1992). The organization was not successful in its past practice of promoting the best sales representatives and the best technicians. The target jobs were multi-level. The organization did not intend to promote

individuals to the district management position who were not good candidates for future promotions. OSS identified employee characteristics that would contribute to success over a long period of time in lower, middle and upper management. The skill dimensions that were identified were leadership, impact on others, decision making, ability to motivate, and communication effectiveness. They developed specific in-basket exercises, mental ability and personality tests, writing exercises, and group discussions. Each assessment center group consisted of six sales and technical staff. The assessors were middle and upper managers and were trained by experts in human resource management. The program was administered in one and one-half days and the assessors compiled their evaluations over an additional day and one-half. Feedback was given to the participants. Managers were given this information to incorporate into promotion decisions. The results were positive in that the new district managers had better skills than in the past. There was an increase in the movement of these managers into the higher levels of management.

The Federal Commercial Promotion Agency (FCPA) is a large government agency that assists companies promote their products and services to other countries. The agency wanted to design an assessment center that would simulate the world market. FCPA used the assessment center to develop potential executive skills and to promote better teamwork among high-level administrators throughout the United States. In this situation, the behavioral simulations are designed as training vehicles. They identify participant areas that would benefit from future training, and in addition, provide training to the

participants on real world situations. Management selected several types of dimensions. Individual dimensions included initiative, assertiveness and impact. At the group level, cooperation and negotiation skills were important. At the organizational level, sensitivity to world events and the ability to have a broad perspective on global business were required. Real life assignments were used in simulated exercises. The assessors were called facilitators and acted as trainers, not evaluators. The agency found this experience to be an effective management training and team building tool, and has continued this program.

Educational Administrators

Strategic Job Analysis

The job analysis is the determining factor in setting up the selection process for an educational administrator. The analysis begins with a thorough position description that highlights the typical duties and responsibilities. The analysis identifies various skills and personality behaviors that will help the candidate to succeed in the specific environment. In addition to the general leadership and management qualities found in most senior administrative positions, this critical analysis attempts to highlight the distinctive components of the job and its relationships to other offices and positions.

Skill Dimensions

Skill dimensions are qualities that have been identified as contributing to the success of the specific job being filled. Senior administrators in education commonly have abilities in many different areas. They include, but are not limited to, organizing and planning, analytical abilities, decision making,

controlling, interpersonal skills, oral communications, influencing and flexibility. A specific skill dimension that is unique to each situation is the ability to work with the stress and local culture that exist in the specific work environment. Work standards differ from organization to organization. The skills and ability to delegate is common to all administrators. However, a major influence on this behavior is the amount and level of support present at the workplace.

The National Association of Secondary School Principals has developed the best known and most widely used assessment procedures to select school principals (Seyfarth, 1996). The participants are rated on the twelve attributes of problem analysis, judgment, organizational ability, decisiveness, leadership, sensitivity, stress tolerance, oral communication, written communication, range of interests, personal motivation and education values.

Interviews, Tests and Exercises

There are many tools, tests and exercises that are available to measure specific behaviors. In many of the actions, models are used to place the applicants into the proper frame. Iconic models are least abstract and are usually scaled physical replications. Analog models are not necessarily visually similar to the actual work experiences, but the behaviors are predictive of the live environment. Mathematical models are mental models and can be manipulated for experimentation and prediction of personnel behavior.

The human resource manager should recommend two or three procedures that target the major findings of the position analysis. The committee must work closely with the assessment center experts in order to be

accurate and clear on their observations. In recording their own observations, the multiple assessors have as a common bond the training that was given to them to understand their roles. Through training, the assessors develop the tools necessary to complete the tasks. Committee members should look to the expert assessors for guidance during the entire selection process.

Interviews

Interviews can be individual or group. They may be structured or unstructured. Interviews are commonly used to gather background information, assess communication skills, observe mental analytic abilities, test problem solving reaction and stress tolerance. Unstructured group interviews are used for community feedback to maximize the participation of the staff and students. These interviews provide the assessors the opportunity to observe the candidates ability to identify, evaluate and respond to new environments. Problem solving interviews are targeted to observe the applicant's reasoning and analytical abilities under modest stress. Stress interviews generally follow a format of a number of rapid harsh questions intended to upset the applicant.

Tests

Tests are the most common means on gathering information about candidates. There are a number of employment related tests that are widely used by many human resource departments in screening job applicants. Tests need to be reliable. Tests should be objective and valid in terms of measuring what they are designed to measure. Tests should be standardized in order for a specific test score to be meaningful, when compared to other scores.

Psychological tests measures personality, temperament, logic, creativity and judgment. Examples of psychological tests include the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory, California Psychological Inventory, Guilford-Zimmerman Temperament Survey and the Watson-Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisal. Knowledge tests measures verbal aptitude, numerical aptitude, technical knowledge, and broad knowledge of supervisory or management practices. These tests include the General Aptitude Test Battery and the Leadership Opinion Questionnaire. Performance tests are both general and specific. They intend to measure physical skills, spatial visualization, numeric mastery and specific on-the-job demands. Graphic response tests are a recent development and measures physiological changes as a person responds to questions. The most common example is the polygraph or lie detector test. The target personality characteristic is honesty. However, many people have objected to this test as an invasion of their privacy. Some states have upheld that viewpoint and have prohibited its use.

In-Basket

The in-basket technique was developed specifically to identify managerial potential. The exercise attempts to replicate real life experiences with memos, phone calls, instructions and personnel. The subjects are to respond as if they were on the job while the assessors observe. At the conclusion of the exercise, the subjects summarize the responses to the events and explain their behaviors.

Group Discussions

Leaderless group discussions target at least two skill dimensions and potentially many more. The target skills can be integrated into the discussions by setting the background and objectives of the discussion. Interpersonal relations and leadership skills are observed and recorded by the assessors. Influencing others, controlling personalities, and flexibility are common skill dimensions that are observed during these types of discussions.

Group discussions may be structured, with roles identified and individual goals that are in competition with each other. Six to eight participants are given a slightly different set of background materials and their objectives are not identical. Limiting the time for a conclusion to the discussion provides the assessors with information on planning, leadership, negotiation and analytical abilities. The outcomes are not as important, usually, as the observed process.

Oral Presentations

Senior administrators often make presentations to groups, internal and external. The background set for the presentations can test many areas relating to the specific position. Presentations could be technical or general. The exercisescould test organization, communication, and leadership abilities.

Case Analysis

The case analysis is often a real life example of a problem that relates to the position. The participant is provided background information and is asked to make a recommendation after a brief analysis. The test measures analytical skills, decision making, and communication. If the recommendation is to be put

in writing, the exercise could measure composition skills. The recommendation can measure interpersonal and presentation skills through an oral report.

Fact Finding

Fact finding exercises can simulate many administrative problems involving the collection of data in order to respond to some issue or complex problem. The subject is provided a problem and asked to make a recommendation. The subject asks questions relating to the issues, seeks various personnel, and makes recommendations based on findings.

Interview Simulations

Interview simulations place the subject in the position of the administrator and presents the subject with a problem. The problem usually is delivered by a third party or by one of the trained assessors. However, I recommend that an existing staff member of the department be considered for this role in order to observe real-time personality dynamics. Staff members need to be trained.

Business Games/Computer Games

The games are generally structured around a problem that requires cooperation with team members and simulates competition with other teams. The teams are required to make decisions in areas of operations, marketing, purchasing and finance. Strategic planning, analytical skills, interpersonal skills, leadership ability and negotiation skills are qualities easily incorporated into these types of exercises for the assessors to observe. Computer application can be integrated into the forums.

Decision Making Scenarios

Decision making and problem solving are a primary focus for all administrative positions. All decision making processes involve some variation of problem definition, identification of alternative courses of actions, evaluation, selection and follow-up. Technical managers identify commonly with the scientific method. The scientific method includes problem definition, data gathering, hypothesis formulation, hypothesis testing, results recording, analysis and the decision to accept or reject. Senior management would benefit from taking a systems point of view to decision making, a holistic approach to problem solving. The senior administrator identifies the inputs, such as the materials, money, people or other resources. In the overall review of the organization, the administrator analyzes the dynamics between processes, including the procedures, activities and programs that are affected. Outputs include services and products that are not independent of one another. The overall environment is assessed as an open system.

Team approaches to decision making supports the process of shared governance, however, there are many potential dangers to committee assignments. Teams are commonly inefficient, time consuming, lacking in leadership, and often result in poor communication and compromised decisions. There is also the problem with accountability and motivation.

The exercises are structured into problems that are presented to the participants. Information is provided on the background, environment, goals and

available resources. The format of the response is provided and the participants are evaluated on both the resolution process and on the final decisions made.

Scheduling

Scheduling is a task oriented process that involves planning, organization and analysis. The simulation exercises may range from simple task assignments and a due date, to a complex array of emergencies and priority settings. All managers deal with scheduling work flow and priorities, in addition to responding to unanticipated events and insufficient resources.

Staff Meeting

This exercise replicates the work environment and provides the assessors the ability observe participant leadership, organization and interpersonal skills. The exercise may be structured to introduce various levels of stress management and the requirement for mediation skills. The exercise normally concludes with the participant making an oral report to the President or Board.

Summary and Recommendations

Assessment centers are time consuming and expensive. However, selecting the best candidates for a senior administrative position in education is an important task. Administrative turnover is costly to the organization in a number of ways. The administrative vacancy places a burden on the remaining administrators. The department with the vacant position lacks leadership. Productivity of the department generally declines without a leader. The application and selection of a new administrator costs money. There is a learning curve and an orientation to the culture that the new administrator must

go through before reaching a level of productivity. There are organizational issues that change with membership.

Many administrative selection processes begin with a review of the position description. The next step, after advertising for the position, is a comparison of paper qualifications presented by the applicant to the position description. A screening of paper documents may be performed by an individual or a team. The applications meeting the cut-off qualifications are forwarded to a committee that reviews the documents and selects certain applicants for interviews. The chosen applicants meet with individuals, groups and may have open forums. Finalists meet with the executives, and sometimes, with board members. References are checked before an offer is made to the candidate.

In my opinion, the assessment center method, in the classical sense, is not practical for most schools and colleges looking for senior administrative personnel. The cost is very high and the process takes a number of days. I would recommend that schools integrate certain principles and exercises into their selection processes.

The assessment center method highlights some of the deficiencies that are common in many search and selection processes for educational administrators. Many position descriptions describe what the position does, but not necessarily the skill and personality dimensions needed to succeed in the position. The culture of the organization is seldom described in any position description, and, in today's litigious environment, should probably be avoided because of the subjective nature of the matter. However, in situational

exercises, using real examples, the applicants can be placed in a position where the organization has the opportunity to observe behavior and to compare that behavior to the culture.

Paper presentations of qualifications should be evaluated on the content of the applicant's experience and achievements relative to the position demands. However, the applicant's ability to put together an impressive presentation can overwhelm the reader. The reviewers should be trained to first look at content and then to presentation.

The personnel involved in the screening and in the committee interviews need to be expert in their ability to carry out their responsibilities. Many selection committees are voluntary. Representative committee groups that include faculty, staff and students, respond to the need for shared governance. However, committee members need to understand the position, learn the job requirements, and to be trained to make informed recommendations.

The use of trained assessors requires a major commitment from the institution in terms of personnel and money. I would base my recommendations on the size of the organization and the volume of activity that runs through the human resource department. The human resource manager should be the institutional expert. The manager would then provide the training and guidance to the evaluation team. If senior administrators turn over on a regular basis, I would suggest that a faculty and staff representative be trained as well and that these individuals participate on the selection processes of senior administrators

for a two year term. The terms could be staggered in order to provide continuity to the assessment team.

In the critical analysis of the position, I would recommend that the committee choose no more than four skill and personality dimensions to observe, in addition to the preliminary paper screening and group interviews. I recommend that at the finalist level, possibly on the second visit to the college, the committee observe two exercises targeted at those specific dimensions that are most important. These exercises should only be applied to the final three or four candidates because of the time and expenses involved in this process.

The feedback that is received from open forums and from group interviews outside of the selection committee generally pertains to presentation, first impressions and superficial personality assessments. This is supportive of shared governance, but must be put into the proper perspective of the overall selection process and other data.

Assessment center principles are the way of the future. Future research should look at alternatives to the classical center that are more expedient and less expensive. The workplace is changing all the time. There is no one prescription on how to select the right candidate because all of the positions are unique, and all of the organizations are unique and ever changing. Thus, it is more important than ever that the selection processes for senior administrators be tailor made.

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